

Harry Havelock Hanson Collection

Cambridge Historical Commission
831 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139

Dates 1889-1959; bulk dates 1891-1919

Extent 1 linear foot

Access Collection is available for research; CHC rules of use apply.

Processing and finding aid completed by Megan Schwenke, April 2012

Provenance and Collection Description

The Harry Havelock Hanson Collection was purchased circa 2007 from eBay by Charles Sullivan, Executive Director, Cambridge Historical Commission.

This collection is primarily composed of the daily pocket diaries of Harry Havelock Hanson, occasional Cambridge resident and career railway man. It also contains some personal papers belonging to Hanson and his family, as well as printed materials from the Cambridge Commandery and Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendants.

Biographical Note

Harry Havelock Hanson was born circa August 28, 1867 in Falmouth, Nova Scotia. His naturalization papers are dated 1906, but he appears in the Cambridge City Directory as early as 1893, rooming at 66 Winthrop Street and working for the Murray Street Stables of the West End Railway Company. Hanson had a very successful career, beginning as a conductor and then a starter on the horsecars. Once the car lines became electrified he worked his way up to inspector and eventually district superintendent, responsible for overseeing several divisions on the Boston Elevated Railway. After a thirty-year career with the Boston Elevated Railway, he resigned to become the superintendent of the Middlesex & Boston Railway in Newton.

In 1898 Hanson married Winifred Isabella (Winnie) Landers, born November 19, 1874 in Middleton, Nova Scotia. The Hansons had two children, Paul L. Hanson and Ruth E. Hanson Steere. The family's last recorded address in the collection materials is at 100 Fairview Avenue in

Belmont. According to the dates on their respective wills, both Harry and Winnie lived into their eighties at least. Please see the Chronology section below for additional biographical information.

Historical Sketch

In the early 19th century, transportation between Cambridge and Boston was carried out primarily by horse-drawn omnibuses, which made stops along a scheduled route. Transit improvements to connect the two cities occurred rapidly however, and by 1856 horse railway service had been introduced by the Cambridge Railroad Company. Embedding rails in the street for the horse-drawn cars allowed for heavier loads and smoother travel than on the omnibuses, which ran in the street and were forced to navigate the uneven surfaces of 19th century roads. Cambridge's horsecar line was the first in New England. Many lines operated by different small companies sprang up throughout the area.

By the fall of 1887, the West End Street Railway had consolidated almost all of the horsecar railways in the Boston area into one large system. Maintaining the fleet of horses required as well as negotiating New England weather proved increasingly challenging to running the system, which led the West End management to consider the use of cable cars, popular in cities such as Chicago and San Francisco, as an alternative. Ultimately they opted instead to convert the many street railway lines to the overhead electric trolley system. The first electric cars began operating in 1889, making Boston a national pioneer in electrified railway travel. The line from Harvard Square to Bowdoin Square in Boston was the second to be converted. The transit system expanded rapidly from this point on, as new electrified routes were created, older routes were extended, and hundreds of new cars were purchased. By the early 1890s, traffic on the system had greatly increased, and city officials were forced to re-examine the existing program to improve service to a swiftly growing ridership.

On July 2, 1894 the privately owned Boston Elevated Railway Company was organized to build an elevated railway system that would link downtown Boston with several suburbs including Cambridge, Roxbury, Charlestown, and South Boston; to do so effectively would require integration with the present surface electric car system. After a proxy fight in November 1896 with the West End Railway Company, by then in financial straits, all surface and rapid transit lines were

unified under the management of the Boston Elevated Railway Company. Ground was broken in 1899 to begin work on the “El”, and by 1900 the last of the horsecars were put out of operation. The transportation system expanded quickly yet again: over the next forty years, new surface routes were instituted, elevated railway lines were built, and subway tunnels were constructed.

In 1947, all Boston Elevated Railway Company stock was purchased by the Commonwealth, prompting the creation of the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), a political agency that would run the transportation system. The MTA was succeeded in 1964 by the present day Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA).

Biographical and Historical Chronology

1889	Hanson begins in railway work as a conductor running a horsecar on Brattle Street, part of the West End Railway system
1892	Promoted to starter
1893	Rooms at 66 Winthrop Street, works as starter for Murray Street Stables
1896	Still employed as a starter at Murray Street Stables, resides 36 Mount Auburn Street
1898	Marries Winifred Isabella (Winnie) Landers on September 7 while still employed as a starter at Murray Street Station
1899	Works as a starter at Boylston St Station in Harvard Square as of August 26; made carhouse inspector in Cambridge later that year. Resides with Winnie at 10 Farwell Place
1900	Son Paul L. is born on January 8
1901	Promoted from carhouse inspector at Murray Street of the West End Railway to Boston Elevated Railway district supervisor inspector at Dudley Street upon the opening of the Boston Elevated Railway on December 7. Family relocates to 5 Gayland St, Roxbury
1906	Daughter Ruth E. is born on December 10
1913	Promoted to superintendent assigned to Division 2, headquartered at Lenox Street, Roxbury, in February
1915	Transferred from Division 2 to the larger Division 7 (encompassing parts of Cambridge), on October 27; this transfer signals a promotion and large increase in responsibility
1917	Promoted to position in the transfer department office at Boston Elevated Railway Company headquarters at 101 Milk Street, Boston
1918	Elected President of the Five-0 Club of Masons in September
1919	Resigns from Boston Elevated Railway Company to become superintendent of Middlesex & Boston Street Railway headquartered in Newton. Family resides at 100 Fairview Ave in Belmont

Related Resources

See also Cambridge Historical Commission biography file on Harry Havelock Hanson

See also Cambridge Historical Commission transportation files on the Cambridge Railway and Union Railway, West End Street Railway, and Boston Elevated Railway Company

See also *Boston's Red Line: Bridging the Charles from Alewife to Braintree* by Frank Cheney; *Fifty Years of Unified Transportation in Metropolitan Boston* by Boston Elevated Railway Company; and *Street Railway B: A Journal* by William Weaver. All titles are available at the CHC.

Scope and Content

Series I: DIARIES (1893-1949, bulk 1897-1919)

This series is composed of 18 pocket diaries kept by Harry Hanson. These diaries vary in frequency of entries; at most a few lines per month are included, at least, there are just a few notes for the entire year. The diaries showing heaviest use are dated 1893, 1894, 1897, 1898, 1900, 1905, and 1911-1914.

Of special interest may be Hanson's notes on his work as a railway official. He began as a starter for the West End Railway and moved up in the ranks after the Boston Elevated Railway consolidation. His various promotions, as well as short commentary on railway developments, such as the introduction of pneumatic breaks in railway cars in 1905, and notable events, like the fatal gas explosion on the Tremont Street line in 1897, are noted in the diaries. He mentions the weather often, as this was an important factor in smooth street railway operation. Personal details are also included: the courting of his wife and birth of his children are documented, along with mention of various errands and social trips to Boston area locations, and journeys to visit family back in Canada. The diaries as a whole provide a snapshot of a railway man's life in Cambridge and the surrounding areas during the late 19th and early 20th century.

Many of the diaries were purchased locally in Boston or Cambridge, and contain advertisements from area businesses.

Series II: PERSONAL PAPERS (1891-1959)

This series is broken down into four files of Hanson family personal papers. Official Documents include copies of the Hansons' marriage certificate, as well as copies of each of their wills. Other materials in this file include Harry Hanson's certificate of United States Citizenship and his daughter Ruth's Massachusetts's driver's license issued in 1925. Correspondence consists of assorted personal correspondence between members of the Hanson family and other acquaintances, including handwritten letters, cards, and telegrams. There is also a short description of the birth of Paul L. Hanson, presumably composed by Harry Hanson based on the handwriting. Financial Records include three receipts issued for various services and payments.

Series III: PRINTED MATERIALS (1910-1965; bulk dates 1957-1965)

The materials in this series are composed of one year of By-Laws and Members Lists for the Cambridge Commandery of the Knights Templar and three years of By-Laws and Members Lists of the Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendents. Harry Hanson is listed as a member of the Cambridge Commandery Drill Squad in 1910. Hanson's daughter, Ruth E. Hanson, is listed under her married name, Mrs. Kenneth Warren Steere, as a member of the Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendents in the 1958 and 1965 booklets.

Series IV: PHOTOGRAPHS (1911)

This series includes a single panoramic photograph of railway motormen in uniform, dated 1911. The photo is held separately from the collection and stored with other panoramic photos in the CHC Library.

Folder List

Series I: DIARIES

1. Diary (1893)
2. Diary (1894)
3. Diary (1897)
4. Diary (1898)
5. Diary (1899)
6. Diary (1900)
7. Diary (1902)
8. Diary (1904)
9. Diary (1905)
10. Diary Case (1906)
11. Diary (1911)
12. Diary (1912)
13. Diary (1913)
14. Diary (1914)
15. Diary Interior (1916)
16. Diary (1918)
17. Diary (1919)
18. Diary (1932), with 1935 notations
19. Diary (1949)

Series II: PERSONAL PAPERS

20. Official Documents (1891-1959)
21. Correspondence (1898-1943)
22. Financial Records (1912-1914)

Series III: PRINTED MATERIALS

23. Cambridge Commandery and Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendents By-Laws and Members Lists (1910-1965)